

# **An Approach to 21st Century Literary Representations of the Holocaust**

## **Un enfoque a las representaciones literarias del siglo XXI sobre el Holocausto**

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### **Resumen**

En este artículo me centro en dos novelas de dos escritores judeoamericanos de tercera generación que se aproximan al tema del Holocausto de manera distinta. En primer lugar, el análisis de imágenes que recuerdan al Holocausto y que aparecen en *La solución final* (*The Final Solution*, 2004) de Michael Chabon. Esta *novella* muestra las secuelas del horror de los campos de concentración a través de la experiencia traumática de un niño-superviviente de nueve años. La otra novela, *Todo está iluminado* (*Everything Is Illuminated*, 2002) de Jonathan Safran Foer, una historia narrada desde dos puntos de vista (uno cómico y el otro serio), parece ser la manera en la que Foer pretende mostrar si ambos puntos de vista son (o no) reconciliables.

**Palabras clave:** Holocausto; memoria y escritura; escritores de tercera generación; transmisión.

### **Abstract**

This essay focuses on two novels by two third-generation writers who approach the Holocaust in a different manner. First, I will look at Holocaust-related imagery in Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution* (2004), a novella which addresses the sequels of the concentration camp horror through the traumatic experience of a 9-year-old survivor. The other novel is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), a story narrated from two points of view—one comic, one serious—which seems to be Foer's way to show whether these two views are reconcilable or not.

**Keywords:** Holocaust; memory and writing; third-generation writers; transmission.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In “Cultural Criticism and Society” (“Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft,” 1951), Theodor Adorno wrote his well-known “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno 1967: 34) – “[n]ach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch” (Adorno 1975: 26). Through this often misunderstood phrase, Adorno was probably wondering how it would be possible to write poetry that could comprehend the Holocaust horror. More than half a century after the publication of “Cultural Criticism and Society,” Efraim Sicher’s *The Holocaust Novel* (2005) came out. At the outset of his “Introduction,” Sicher refers to “the difficulties of finding a medium or text that will bear the impossibility of imagining the unimaginable, of rendering into art the negation of art” (3).<sup>1</sup> Countless are the references to the “impossibility of imagining the unimaginable”—i.e. imagining nightmarish incamp experience (let alone explain it). For example, in *Primo Levi. The Passage of a Witness* (*Primo Levi. Le passage d’un témoin*, 2011; not translated into English), Philippe Mesnard refers to Levi’s description of Auschwitz as a place “impossible to understand and to imagine” (translation mine) – “impossible à comprendre et à imaginer” (125).

Apart from Levi, there are a number of survivors who also allude to the impossibility of expressing the Auschwitz inferno. That is the case with Elie Wiesel, who addresses in *Night* (*La Nuit*, 1958) the difficulty of verbalizing what he went through during his concentrationary imprisonment: “But how was one to rehabilitate and transform words betrayed and perverted by the enemy?” (2006 [1958]: ix) – “Trahie, corrompue, pervertie par l’ennemi, comment pouvait-on réhabiliter et humaniser la parole?” (Wiesel 2007 [1958]: 12). For her part, in one poem included in *The Measure of Our Days* (*Mesure de nos jours*, 1971), the third volume of her trilogy *Auschwitz and After* (*Auschwitz et après*, 1970-1971), Charlotte Delbo says that she had to “explain the inexplicable” (1995: 276) – “expliquer l’inexplicable” (1971: 78).

At the end of *Mrs. Auschwitz. The Gift of Speech – Signora Auschwitz. Il dono de la parola*, 2014 [1999]; not translated into English<sup>2</sup> – the Hungarian-born survivor-witness Edith Bruck includes a letter she received from Maria, a teenage girl who is a survivor of the 1990s wars in the Balkans. Maria expresses her encounter with Bruck like this: “*Meeting you has really helped me realize that there are no words to define the nightmare occurred in*

<sup>1</sup> For an extended analysis of the interrelation between ethics and art, consult for instance Lang’s book-length analysis (2000).

<sup>2</sup> A French edition of this work—*Signora Auschwitz: Le don de la parole (Entre histoire et mémoire)*—was published in 2015.

*Auschwitz*” (translation mine) – “*Conoscerla è stato veramente scoprire che non ci sono parole per definire l’incubo che ha subito ad Auschwitz*” (91; emphasis in original).

Last but not least, the Spanish Buchenwald survivor Jorge Semprún specifically refers to the theme of transmission—i.e. of passing the *Konzentrationslager* experience on to the next generation—as a kind of mission impossible. This is what he wrote in *Literature or Life* (*L’écriture ou la vie*, 1994): “The essential truth of the experience, cannot be imparted... Or should I say, it cannot be imparted only through literary writing” (1997: 125) – “la vérité essentielle de l’expérience, n’est pas transmissible... Ou plutôt, elle n’est pas que par l’écriture littéraire” (1994: 167; ellipsis in original).

However, there are survivors who, as in the case of the Hungarian Auschwitz survivor Imre Kertész, approach this issue from a diametrically different perspective. This is how he addresses it in *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (*Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*, 1990):

*And please stop saying, I most probably said, that Auschwitz cannot be explained, that Auschwitz is the product of irrational, incomprehensible forces, because there is always a rational explanation for wrongdoing; it’s quite possible that Satan himself, like Iago, is irrational.* (1997: 31)<sup>3</sup>

At least two major challenges are faced by a survivor. The first one is how to explain the “unimaginable.” In an interview Aharon Appelfeld (אהרן אפלפלד) granted to Philip Roth (Appelfeld in Roth 2001: 18-39), the Israeli fiction writer and Auschwitz survivor says very clearly that the only thing the Holocaust can cause is silence: “The Holocaust belongs to the type of enormous experience that reduces one to silence. Any utterance, any statement, any ‘answer’ is tiny, meaningless, and occasionally ridiculous. Even the greatest of answers seems petty” (38).

The second challenge is to transmit their experience to subsequent generations, which is a Herculean struggle of memory against forgetting. In this sense, becoming a witness is something essential if we do not want History to repeat itself. Primo Levi believes that since History will be judged one day, “I had to witness for its victims” (translation mine) – “je devais témoigner pour ses victimes” (Mesnard 2011: 11).

As regards Jorge Semprún, he is deeply concerned about the day when the last survivor of the Holocaust nightmare disappears. In *Literature or Life*, he wonders what will happen then: “there would be no more immediate memory of Buchenwald” (1997: 292) – “Il n’y

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<sup>3</sup> “És hagyjátok ezt abba végre, mondhattam valószínűleg, hogy Auschwitzra nincs magyarázat, hogy Auschwitz az irracionális, az ésszel fel nem fogható erők szüleménye, mert a rossza mindig van ésszerű magyarázat, meglehet, hogy a Sátán maga, akárcsak Jágó, irracionális, teremtményei azonban, igenis, racionális lények” (1990: 65).

aurait plus de mémoire immédiate de Buchenwald” (1994: 374). Understandably, Semprún is not only scared of the disappearance of the last eye witness but, like Aharon Appelfeld, he fears a no lesser evil: silence.

Bearing witness is therefore a must-do task if fighting against silence is a priority. Passing testimony on to others is a central Holocaust-related matter that Ephraim Sicher explores in his aforementioned 2005 book-length study: the idea of transmission—“collective memory”—as the only effective way not to forget<sup>4</sup>: “the burden of collective and personal memory presses on the children of the victims and the perpetrators even more because of their lack of knowledge, because of their need to imagine the unimaginable and to fill the gaps in national and family history” (Sicher 2005: 6). Aarons, Pratt and Shechner round off this idea when they claim that second- and third-generation writers “acknowledge a legacy of loss and accept an obligation to carry memory into the future” (2015: 7). Victoria Aarons had explained it in a similar way: “Such garnered memories are openings for midrashic moments of continuity and extension, *an invitation to carry the weight of memory into the present*” (2012a: 139; emphasis mine).

In 1975—i.e. three decades before Sicher’s book came out—the Brooklyn-born poet Charles Reznikoff’s *Holocaust* was published. This is a book-length poem whose material had been drawn on court records of the 1961 Eichmann trial held in Jerusalem. Reznikoff’s arguably best work seems to serve a threefold purpose: first, it is a powerful “medium or text” to “bear the impossibility of imagining the unimaginable”; second, it is an appropriate way “of rendering into art the negation of art”; and third, it is his commitment to carrying “the weight of memory into the present” and “into the future.” Although with a different purpose, this threefold aim is, in my view, well summarized in the first part of the title of another major Reznikoff work: *Testimony: the United States, 1885-1915* (1978-1979).

The interrelation between “memory” and “imagination” has been taken up by fiction writers and scholars. One of the latter is Jessica Lang, who points out that “Holocaust literature that does not have its immediate origins in the author’s memory must rely on other devices for representing the event” (Lang 2009: 44). According to her, one of the problems is that “as with other historical events for which few or no eyewitnesses remain,

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<sup>4</sup> Jorge/George Santayana’s well-known maxim “[t]hose who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (2011: 172) is at the core of remembering; in connection with the issue of “remembering vs. forgetting,” there is a very revealing *New Yorker* interview with the Holocaust survivor Aharon Appelfeld. At one point of the interview with Philip Gourevitch, Appelfeld refers to this issue as follows: “When I came to Israel (ישראל), the slogan was ‘Forget.’ Until the late sixties—‘Forget’. And if you talk about the Holocaust, then, only the heroic part—partisans, not the camps” (Gourevitch 2018); for an insightful full-length study of Holocaust-oriented memory, see Lipstadt (2016).

the Holocaust is increasingly a subject matter for the imagination" (44). Later, she establishes a crucial difference between first- and second-generation Holocaust writers—for whom "the historical experience 'conveys' a sense of immediacy and impact" (46; emphasis mine)—and the third-generation writer, who "views these events as an indirect part of the narrative, one balanced by other, also important, histories" (46). Second-generation Holocaust writers<sup>5</sup> are not only "writers and artists" who "are children of survivors" but also "members of their generation" (Sicher 2005: 5).<sup>6</sup> Among others, Cynthia Ozick fits into this description.

Elsewhere (Sánchez Canales 2011: 29-30) I refer to a well-known interview in which Elaine M. Kauvar asked Cynthia Ozick whether the Holocaust should remain history. Her answer was: "It should. I believe with all my soul that it ought to remain exclusively attached to document and history" (Kauvar 1993: 390). In this respect, Ozick was expressing her concern about the danger of denying the Holocaust as a consequence of its fictionalization. At one point of her interview, Kauvar raised a question about the novelist's own fictionalization in "The Shawl" (1980). Ozick's reply was as follows:

*I did it in five pages in "The Shawl," and I don't admire that I did it. I did it because I couldn't help it. It wanted to be done. I didn't want to do it, and afterward I've in a way punished myself, I've accused myself for having done it. I wasn't there, and I pretended through imagination that I was. I've also on occasion been punished in angry letters from people who really were there. But I wasn't there, and the story is not a document, it's an imagining.* (391)

Ozick's discomfort of writing such a story was due to her belief that the Holocaust should be approached from a non-fictional point of view—as in the case of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1985 [1961]) and Lucy S. Dawidowicz' *The War Against the Jews 1933-1945* (1986 [1975]), among others—instead of from a purely artistic perspective, unless the narrative is written by a Holocaust survivor. To give just some examples, Aharon Appelfeld's *Badenheim 1939* – (באדנהיים עיר נופש, 1978) – Imre Kertész's *Kaddish for a Child Not Born* (*Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*, 1990), Primo Levi's *If*

<sup>5</sup> For an extended analysis of second-generation writing, see McGlothlin's book (2006); consult also Aarons (2012b: 138-139).

<sup>6</sup> At the end of Edith Bruck's *Signora Auschwitz* (2014 [1999]) there is a letter by a young woman called Maria, who survived the 1990s Wars in the Balkans. At one point of her letter, she writes: "We live in the kind of ignorance that young people do not want to know. They also negate the existence of concentration camps and it is difficult to persuade them; I have tried to tell my companions the story of the camps, the story of entire peoples transformed into ash, your story that could be our future" (translation mine; emphasis in original) – "viviamo nell'ignoranza che i giovani non vogliono sapere, e addirittura negano l'esistenza dei campi di concentramento ed è difficile persuaderli; io ho cercato di raccontare ai miei compagni la storia dei campi, la storia di popoli interi trasformati in cenere, la vostra storia che potrebbe diventare il nostro futuro" (92).

*Not Now, When?* (*Se non ora, quando?*, 1982), Jorge Semprún's *Literature or Life*, and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. (An in-depth analysis of Kertész' *Kaddish* and Levi's *If Not* by Aimee Pozorski and Cheryl Chaffin, respectively, is included in the present volume.)

In a *New Yorker* interview with Aharon Appelfeld published on January 5th, 2018<sup>7</sup>—i.e. the day after he passed away—this Holocaust survivor and writer expressed his view about the role that fiction plays: “I always felt that fiction was the way to the deepest truths”<sup>8</sup> (Gourevitch 2018). Ozick, who as shown above experienced the need to fictionalize the Holocaust,<sup>9</sup> must have felt relieved by Appelfeld's claim. Philip Mesnard appropriately alludes to this issue in his aforementioned Levi biography: “Science-fiction could be... a *veicolo fondamentale* (a fundamental medium) because it speaks a language that nowadays is understood by many, by everyone” (translation mine; ellipsis mine) – “La science-fiction peut être... un *veicolo fondamentale* (un vecteur fondamental), parce qu'elle parle un langage qui aujourd'hui est entendu par beaucoup, par tous” (2011: 332).

A similar need to fictionalize the Holocaust must have been experienced by second- and third-generation writers such as Shalom Auslander, Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, Allegra Goodman, David Grossman, Cynthia Ozick, Thane Rosenbaum, and Philip Roth, all of whom feel that “the Holocaust has ineradicably shaped their lives” (Aarons, Pratt & Shechner 2015: 6). The way they “view [this] event” (Lang 2009: 46), however, is very unlikely to be similar because, among other reasons, “third-generation narratives reveal attempts to comprehend, give voice to, and demystify the ‘unimaginable’, unrepresentable fracture of the Holocaust, remaking a place for the Shoah's necessary imprint in the twenty-first century” (Aarons 2016: xiii).<sup>10</sup>

In this paper, I will focus on two novels by two third-generation writers<sup>11</sup> who approach the Holocaust in a different way. First, I will look at Holocaust-related imagery in Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution* (2004), a novella which, in the guise of a detective story, addresses the sequels of the concentration camp horror through the traumatic experience of a 9-year-old survivor named Linus Steinmann. The second novel is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). Narrated from two different perspectives, this

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<sup>7</sup> See also note 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Malamud's biographer Philip Davis explains that the way to “do justice to Malamud” is to study his fiction because “[i]t was fiction that provided the best *context* for human understanding” (2007: x; emphasis in original). I believe this claim can also be extended to Appelfeld's works.

<sup>9</sup> A number of scholars have written about the inadequacy of approaching the Holocaust from either an artistic or a comic perspective. See, among others, Clendinnen (1999) and Ornstein (2006).

<sup>10</sup> For an approach to literature of contemporary Jewish-American writing from different perspectives, consult Aarons (2019).

<sup>11</sup> For fiction writers such as Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander and Jonathan Safran Foer, among others, the term “Post-Roth generation” has been used (Zakrzewski 2003 qtd. in Codde 2011: 676).



narrative examines the theme of the Holocaust from a comic and a serious view. The analysis of these two perspectives intends to show whether these two views are reconcilable—or not—from Foer's standpoint.

## 2. MICHAEL CHABON'S *THE FINAL SOLUTION*

A first aspect that can be underlined about Michael Chabon's *Final Solution* is that the plot of this novella has nothing to do with the Holocaust. Set in an English village in the summer of 1944, *The Final Solution* is the story of the murder of a British foreign officer named Mr Shane and the disappearance of Bruno, the protagonist's parrot. Finding Bruno might help solve the puzzle of the murder. The title of the narrative is a pun which not only alludes to the solution of the mystery<sup>12</sup> but also to Hitler's well-known mass extermination plans.<sup>13</sup> In this section, I will analyze Holocaust-related imagery used in Chabon's novella.<sup>14</sup>

As explained below, *The Final Solution* revolves around the muteness of the protagonist, 9-year-old Linus Steinman, which epitomizes the source of trauma—the Holocaust itself—and the effect of such trauma throughout the child's life.<sup>15</sup>

One of the recurrent leitmotifs in this story is the train. In spite of being spared the awful experience of the death trains and the concentration camps, the children of Holocaust survivors like Linus were transmitted their parents' fears, anxieties and other traumatic experiences.<sup>16</sup> This will likely help us understand—and explain—the origin of Linus's muteness. The allusions to trains in *The Final Solution* seem to underscore the presence of a highly traumatic event like the "cattle car" experience. These "deportation transports" were "the principal locations of victims' suffering and memory" (Gigliotti 2009: 2). The reader learns that Linus, who arrived in England from Germany as a deportee,<sup>17</sup> was one of the ten thousand child refugees brought on the *Kindertransporte* (Children's transports): "the boy and his parents were spared deportation in 1938. Taken off the train at the last moment, I gather" (Chabon 2005 [2004]: 68). Children born before the

<sup>12</sup> Richardson (2010) approaches Chabon's story as a "narrative device of Historian-As-Detective," on the one hand, and as "a standardized feature of contemporary Holocaust fiction," on the other.

<sup>13</sup> Dawidowicz (1986 [1975]) and Hilberg (1985 [1961]) address, among other issues, the extermination of millions of Jews during the Nazi years; Friedländer (2007) is another in-depth analysis of the years of extermination (1939-1945).

<sup>14</sup> For an extended study of this issue, consult Sánchez Canales (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Chabon's narrative has been interpreted as "an allegory of man's futile quest for understanding of the Holocaust" (Craps & Buelens 2011: 569).

<sup>16</sup> For an extended study of child survivors' testimonies after World War II, consult Cohen (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Marrus (2007) examines the custody of Jewish child survivors of the Holocaust rescued by Catholic families and/or institutions.

Holocaust—as in the protagonist’s case—went through drastic changes in their environment. Many of these children like Linus Steinman, who were separated from their parents, were in urgent need of love and affection. For this reason, they became attached to anything they felt that belonged to the world they had left behind. In Chabon’s narrative, it is Bruno, his inseparable parrot.<sup>18</sup> (In Cynthia Ozick’s 1980 story “The Shawl,” Rosa, a Holocaust survivor whose 18-month-old daughter Magda was killed by an SS officer, is attached to Magda’s shawl.) According to Milton Kestenberg and Judith Kestenberg, this behavior reveals a need to create a space of belonging: “The basic trust that accounts for dependability in a relationship is the mainstay of a permanent sense of belonging” (Kestenberg & Kestenberg 1988: 538).

Significantly, at the outset of the narrative Linus “with a parrot on his shoulder was walking along the railway tracks” (Chabon 2005 [2004]: 1). A few minutes later, the old detective sees the boy trying to cross an electrified fence. Horrified by the child’s imminent electrocution, the old man shouts at him: “For pity’s sake, you’d be fried like a smelt! ... One can only imagine the stench” (4; ellipsis mine). Half way through the story, Linus, who catches his hand on barbed wire, is helped by the detective to get the wire out of his hand. Suddenly, the child bursts into tears: “He took hold of the boy’s hand. On the back, just below the wrist, a puffy nipple of flesh, tipped with the black filament of the barb.... The boy wept freely during this procedure” (78; ellipsis mine). The fact that he “wept freely” and that “[t]he barb [finally] tumbled free” (79) is a reminder of the impossibility of leaving history—as a traumatic event—behind.

Typically, traumatic (Holocaust) memories are usually triggered by external cues such as the trains or the electrified fence, which bring the narrator back to the horrors of the concentration camps. The presence of barbed wire provokes fear and anxiety in the child. Something similar happens to Rosa in Ozick’s homonymous story. Every time she sees a barbed wire fence, she panicks (Ozick 1990 [1989]: 48, 49, 51, 52, 53).

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<sup>18</sup> For an account of “train transportation” throughout Nazism, see, for example, “The Journey” (Levi 2016a, I: 9-17) – “Il viaggio” (Levi 2016b, I: 144-148); “The Trip” (Delbo 1995: 172-180) – “Le voyage” (Delbo 1970b: 94-108) – and “Berlin” (Delbo 1995: 181-186; Delbo 1970b: 109-118); and Gigliotti (2006) for an analysis of the deportation train journeys in Thane Rosenbaum’s short story “Cattle Car Complex”—included in his *Elijah Visible: Stories* (1996); consult also Fast (2011), where it is explained that “children’s stories—whether about the Kindertransport, life in hiding, or survival in the camps—form the fabric of the tapestry” (xiii); Reznikoff’s poem “Children” (Reznikoff 1975: 67-70), which is based on a US government publication entitled *Trials of the Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunal* and the records of the well-known Eichmann trial held in Jerusalem in 1961; for an autobiographical account of the “cattle truck” experience, see Semprún (1964/1963).



Other external cues that can help activate the horrors of their imprisonment are fire and heat. These two images, which underline a sense of suffocation, ineluctably bring the experiencer back to their times as Holocaust inmates. In *The Final Solution*, where the summer days are very hot, the ex-detective, currently retired, has become a bee-keeper. At one point, we learn that the old man, who is scared of the heat and fire, finds that it is a way to die an undignified death.

*He did not fear death exactly, but he had evaded it for so many years that it had come to seem formidable simply by virtue of that long act of evasion. In particular he feared dying in some undignified way, on the jakes or with his face in the porridge.*  
(Chabon 2005 [2004]: 75-77)

This seems to echo the fear experienced by the millions of Jews killed in gas chambers in a number of concentration camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Majdanek, Mauthausen-Gusen, Sachsenhausen, Sobibór and Treblinka, among others. Cynthia Ozick uses a similar image when she describes a Miami summer, which she identifies with a burning (dying) Miami—as a symbol of the old, retired people awaiting death—and the hot, burning camps where many people were also awaiting death.

In connection with other Holocaust-related images present in *The Final Solution* are the numbers uttered by Bruno. What makes the old detective suspect that something does not square is the fact that the parrot utters what *seem* to be several series of numbers: 2175473 (“Zwei eins sieben fünf vier sieben drei,” Chabon 2005 [2004]: 3), 4849117 (“Vier acht vier neun eins eins sieben,” 3) and 9938267 (“Neun neun drei acht zwei sechs sieben,” 9). Linus’ parrot, the key character who facilitates the solution of the mystery, disappears. When Bruno is finally found, he is in a bag. Being inside the bag is something Bruno cannot put up with. To my mind, the explicit reference to the parrot’s difficulty to breathe in that confined space points to the awful claustrophobic experience felt by the Auschwitz inmates when they were in the gas chambers. When he is finally taken out of the bag, he begins to utter several series of numbers in German. Needless to say, these allude to the registration numbers prisoners were tattooed upon their arrival at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

At the outset of this section, I said that in *The Final Solution*, whose main plot revolves around a murder case that needs resolving, there are a number of Holocaust-related images. I find Anna Richardson’s explanation in this respect most apropos: “[t]he intricacy of Doyle’s plots in many ways parallels the complexity of the Holocaust; read in this way, Chabon’s choice of generic framework is a subtle attempt to represent the unknowability of the Holocaust in narrative form” (Richardson 2010: 163). It is an approach to the

Holocaust from a fictional perspective. It is up to the reader to decide whether it has been an appropriate—or inappropriate—way to address it.

### 3. JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER'S *EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED*

In reference to Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, the editors of *The New Diaspora: The Changing Landscape of American Jewish Fiction* allude to the narrator's phrase "[t]he origin of a story is always an absence" as "a gap in the narrative that one hopes to fill by looking back. From absent or imperfect memory emerge narratives of continuing trauma" (Aarons, Patt & Shechner 2015: 6).<sup>19</sup>

In *Everything Is Illuminated*, which focuses on the interrelation between memory and writing, Jonathan Safran Foer addresses the theme of the Holocaust from two different perspectives, one comic—epitomized by Alex(ander) Perchov—and one serious—embodied by the author's alter ego Jonathan Safran. In order to introduce this twofold approach to the Holocaust, I find that the novelist's explanation in an interview to Houghton Mifflin is very timely here:

*The novel's two voices—one "realistic," the other "folkloric"—and their movement toward each other, has to do with this problem of imagination. The Holocaust presents a real moral quandary for the artist. Is one allowed to be funny? Is one allowed to attempt verisimilitude? To forgo it? What are the moral implications of quaintness? Of wit? Of sentimentality? What, if anything, is untouchable? (emphasis mine)*

On the one hand, the narrative enables Foer to ponder the appropriateness of addressing the Holocaust from a fictional standpoint. (This takes us back to the part of Elaine Kauvar's interview to Ozick when the interviewer asks the novelist about this aspect); on the other, asking whether there is anything "untouchable" directly points to, among other things, the possibility of resorting to comedy and humor.<sup>20</sup>

In this section, I will attempt to demonstrate that, to Jonathan Safran Foer, there is little room—if any—for comedy when it comes to the issue of the Holocaust. For this reason, I will examine how the use of humor, which to a great extent is epitomized by Alex's efforts to reconcile the perpetrators and the victims, turns out to be fruitless in the overcoming of the Holocaust trauma.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Codde (2011) analyzes the fiction of third-generation authors like Jonathan Safran Foer in light of Jacques Derrida's concept of "traces"—i.e. spectral elements concealed and discernible in the text as "absent presences."

<sup>20</sup> For reasons of space, here I will not go into the issue of humor as a coping strategy. However, the reader interested in this topic can consult Cory (1995), Eckhardt (1992), Gilman (2000) and Kift (1996), among others.

<sup>21</sup> Feuer (2007) and Propst (2011), for instance, examine Holocaust memory and reconciliation.

In *Everything Is Illuminated*, Foer introduces two completely different characters: Jonathan Safran, an American Jew, and Alex(ander) Perchov, a half-Jew/half-Gentile Ukrainian. Alex is a funny lad whose humorous tone helps the author—and the reader—reflect on the possibility and desirability of framing the debate on the Holocaust in comic book form. However, as I pointed out elsewhere (2011a: 255), “Foer’s attempt ‘to heal the rift, or wound’ is finally thwarted by his rejection of Alex’s comic, optimistic tone and his implicit defence of the idea that the post-Auschwitz era can only be approached in serious terms.”<sup>22</sup>

In connection with humor and its interrelation with hope, Roy Eckardt’s 1992 study is illuminating. According to Eckardt, the individual who tries to transform tragedy into comedy can change fate into freedom. Furthermore, tragedy can provide the human being with a sense of courage. However, only comedy can instil in us a sense of hope because, as explained in the case of Auslander’s *Kugel*, if there is humor, there is hope, and if there is hope, there is humor.<sup>23</sup>

If we want to look at the role of humor in a novel like *Everything Is Illuminated*, it should be said that a comic, humorous attitude toward life like Alex’s clashes with Jonathan’s pessimistic—i.e. tragic—writing. On the one hand, Alex’s optimism is meant to be a kind of cure to alleviate decades of suffering and to contribute to narrowing the rift between the perpetrators and the victims.<sup>24</sup> Jonathan finds the Ukrainian youth’s attitude extremely irritating. Throughout the narrative, Alex does not stop trying to be friends with Jonathan. However, he ends up realizing that this will be mission impossible. Early in the story, Alex writes something in his first letter that reveals the implausibility of his plan: “We became like friends while you were in Ukraine, yes? In a different world, we could have been real friends” (Foer 2002: 26).

Jonathan’s narrative begins as a fantastical reconstruction of his ancestors’ lives in Trachimbrod from March 18, 1791—the first record of the Trachimbrodian history—to June 18, 1941—the day the Nazis bombed the *shtetl* (שטעטל) and reduced it to ashes.<sup>25</sup> The reconstruction of the history of Trachimbrod intermingles with Jonathan’s journey to Ukraine to visit his grandfather Safran’s *shtetl*—or what remains of it—and meet

<sup>22</sup> For an extended analysis of the role of humor in *Everything Is Illuminated*, see Sánchez Canales (2011a).

<sup>23</sup> See note 20.

<sup>24</sup> In an essay entitled “Notes toward a Meditation on ‘Forgiveness’” included in Wiesenthal (1976: 184-190), Cynthia Ozick addresses the issue of forgiveness. (This essay is not included in the German edition of Wiesenthal’s book.)

<sup>25</sup> For an in-depth study of the use of magic realism in *Everything Is Illuminated*, see, for example, Adams (2009).

Augustine. Augustine is the last surviving Trachimbrodian who could help Jonathan reconstruct a 50-year-plus gap in his family history. One of the reasons why the comic element is used at the outset of the novel—and not after the *shtetl* was bombed by the Nazis—is that, at this early stage of the history of Trachimbrod, the local inhabitants enjoyed the Edenic innocence present in the folkloric, magic-realist world of 20<sup>th</sup> century Yiddish writers like Isaac Bashevis Singer (צחק באשעוויס זינגער).<sup>26</sup> It makes sense, then, to think that for Jonathan, it is not disrespectful to resort to comedy to depict quasi-idyllic Jewry before millions of Jews were murdered in numerous concentration camps. It is also clear that with the extermination of millions of Jews at the Nazi hands, the human being left behind a quiet, haven-like life and entered a new world.<sup>27</sup>

Through comedy, Jonathan depicts not only an imagined world but also a remembered one. In this way, he can find comfort in recalling a pre-existent order in which life was more peaceful and simple. The optimism displayed at the beginning of the novel gives way to bitter pessimism, especially in the second half of *Everything Is Illuminated*. Halfway through the narrative, Jonathan tells Alex that he used to approach harsh reality through humor: “I used to think that humor was the only way to appreciate how wonderful and terrible the world is, to celebrate how big life is” (Foer 2002: 158). However, with the passing of time, he realized he was mistaken because “now I think it’s the opposite. Humor is a way of shrinking from that wonderful and terrible world” (158).

Toward the end of the narrative, Alex’s joy starts to falter until his funny comments virtually disappear in his last letters. He eventually understands that he must give up his American dream and face the grim reality of taking charge of his little brother Igor after his grandfather’s suicide.

In conclusion, in spite of Alex’s humor and comedy—as an epitome of forgiveness—it seems that to Foer there is little (if any) room for hope in the reconciliation process between the perpetrators and the victims.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have placed an emphasis on the idea that the theme of the Holocaust, which is part of our “collective memory” (Sicher 2005), is “an invitation to carry the weight of memory into the present” (Aarons 2012a: 139). The way(s) how to pass the testimony on

<sup>26</sup> Farrell (1992) gathers some of the most significant interviews with I. B. Singer. The Jewish-American storyteller and novelist of Polish extract discusses his own fiction as well as the fiction of many other writers; for a full-length study of the “Jewish fool”—*schlemiel* (שלימיאל)—, consult Pinsker (1991) and Wisse (1971).

<sup>27</sup> For a sociological approach to the Holocaust, see Bauman (1999 [1991]); see also Newman and Erber (2002) for a study of this genocide from a social-psychological perspective.

to the next generation(s) has/have been open to heated debates for decades. As explained at the beginning, there are those who think this can only be done through the testimonies of the ones who were actually ‘there’—i.e. Holocaust survivors. The advocates of this approach think that it could be done in the form of a historical document or in fiction form. There is another way to address this issue—as does the so-called second- and third-generation writer, who “views these events as an indirect part of the narrative” (Lang 2009: 46). Also as pointed out at the outset of this essay, the Holocaust survivor and writer Aharon Appelfeld explicitly said in his last interview that fictionalizing stories—including a traumatic event like the Holocaust—is “the way to the deepest truths.” Whatever the approach is, the really important thing is that, as the Jewish-American historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (יוסף חיים ירושלמי) said in connection with the interrelation between “collective memory” and Jewish history, “[t]he collective memories of the Jewish people were a function of the shared faith, cohesiveness, and will of the group itself” (1982: 94). So be it.

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